



Story 4: Adela Ramírez

“People cross the border in search of new opportunities for their families,” Adela Ramírez explains. “That is why we always say that migrating is an act of love.”

A human rights advocate in Guatemala, Adela has a deep understanding of the conditions in the country that make it impossible for many to remain in their home communities. Violence against women, extreme poverty, discrimination against Indigenous peoples, and lack of opportunities for young people are some of the key factors leading record numbers of people – the majority of them Indigenous – to migrate from Guatemala.

“The majority of people here live in conditions that are not good, and poverty prevents them from fully living their lives,” Adela shares about Huehuetenango, the department where she lives in northwestern Guatemala – and where most Guatemalans migrating to the United States in recent years have originated from.

Huehuetenango means “place of the ancients” and is predominantly made up of Indigenous Maya communities who have lived in the area for more than 1,000 years. “We Maya People are an ancient people, builders of life, with a history of resistance, resilience, and struggle,” Adela shares. “Nevertheless, we have been stripped of our lands

and subjected to multiple injustices that make us vulnerable.” Adela points out that the disproportionate rate of extreme poverty experienced by Indigenous people explains why they make up such a high number of people in migration.

For many Maya People and Guatemalans who migrate, the painful process of leaving home is only the beginning of new challenges. “When we are forced to leave our communities, we leave behind everything that is known to face an unknown world,” Adela explains. “In a way, the family is broken. We face many risks and many even lose their lives along the way.”

These challenges are compounded by anti-immigrant sentiment and increasingly harsh immigration policies in the United States and Mexico – which are narrowing the legal paths to asylum, rejecting valid asylum claims, and targeting undocumented people who have lived in the country for years. (Additionally, fleeing food insecurity is not considered valid grounds for asylum, an exclusion especially relevant for Guatemalans migrating.) “Migrating people are treated like criminals,” Adela explains. “When they are captured and returned to their communities, children are left in shelters and other places where their rights are violated.”

This is where Adela and others



Pop No’j continued work during COVID-19, including distributing food and money to support families facing food insecurity during the crisis. (Adela is pictured left below.)



from her organization, Asociación Pop No'j, come in. A UUSC partner since 2017, Pop No'j is a civil society organization that advocates for the rights of people migrating and supports people after they have been deported from the United States or Mexico to Guatemala. With UUSC's support, Pop No'j staff members like Adela accompany families throughout the process of return and reintegration, providing mental health services, educational support, and vocational training. "This accompaniment work is very important since it includes psychosocial care," Adela shares. "Separation deeply impacts their emotional and mental health."

In her work, Adela explains that she is careful to avoid "revictimizing the families," recognizing that the injustices they have experienced are painful to relive. Instead, Adela and Pop No'j foster empowerment and provide families with the tools to improve their lives. "We are only here to accompany and facilitate processes," she explains. "With our work, we want to facilitate learning so that the people can become the protagonists of their own lives and be agents of change."

Pop No'j recognizes that addressing immediate needs is not enough – so they are advocating for the rights of people in migration on a larger scale while envisioning a more just Guatemala. Adela shares that Pop No'j "promotes the building of 'buen vivir' or 'good living,' based on the Maya People's worldview, their identity, and rights." In this way, Pop No'j strives toward a just society where people are not forced from their communities by poverty or other factors, but rather can experience their full rights and identities wherever they are.

Links to Learn More

- [Video of Adela](#)
- [UUSC blog post featuring Asociación Pop No'j](#)
- [Video greetings from other Asociación Pop No'j staff](#)

